

CHIP supporters gathering signatures

By MIKE DENNISON – Helena Independent Record - 03/18/08

Backers of a ballot measure to provide health insurance for as many as 30,000 uninsured children in Montana kicked off their signature-gathering drive this weekend, including a push Monday at the St. Patrick's Day parade in Butte.

State Auditor John Morrison, a leader of the Healthy Montana Kids initiative campaign, said he gathered 150 signatures himself at the parade — and that a half-dozen other signature-gatherers worked the Butte crowd as well.

"I can't tell you how many people signed up who had a child standing by their side, and told me that the child was uninsured," he said.

Initiative 155 would expand Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Plan, or CHIP, two government-financed programs that provide health insurance for low- and middle-income kids.

Supporters need the signatures of 22,308 registered Montana voters to qualify the measure for the November ballot.

It's estimated the measure would cost state government about \$20 million a year, starting in 2009.

The fiscal note attached to the initiative petition says the measure would transfer \$22 million a year from the state treasury into a special account to finance the expansion of publicly funded health insurance for children.

Last week, Gov. Brian Schweitzer's budget office produced its own fiscal evaluation of the measure, estimating the cost at \$38.5 million for the next two years and another \$45.5 million for the two years after that.

"The initiative increases health insurance for children without providing for additional state taxes," the budget office said. "Therefore, a significant reduction in general tax revenues for other state services would start December 2008."

Schweitzer, a Democrat up for re-election this year, hasn't taken a position on I-155, although he has said he's concerned whether the state can afford it. Schweitzer has said he won't support tax increases.

Morrison, also a Democrat, said passage and funding of I-155 shouldn't take money away from other government programs.

The state's budget surplus may be higher than forecast this year and should be able to absorb the cost of expanding CHIP and Medicaid, he said. Also, expanding the two programs would generate up to \$75 million of matching federal health-care funds, which would have a positive economic impact, Morrison added.

"There are no existing programs and no existing funding that will be impaired for the foreseeable future by this initiative," he said.

Both CHIP and Medicaid are funded proportionately by the state and federal government. The feds provide about 80 percent of CHIP funds and 60 percent to 65 percent of Medicaid funds.

I-155 says the programs won't be expanded unless there is adequate federal funding to match state funds. If the initiative gets on the ballot and is approved by Montana voters, the 2009 Montana Legislature also would have to authorize the expanded funding.

Backers of the measure received its final language on Friday, for distribution with the petitions to gather signatures to place it on the ballot. Morrison said the campaign has nine paid "signature captains" around the state and hopes to have many volunteers.

“We have a lot of dedicated people working in different parts of the state,” he said. “I fully expect that this initiative will be on the (November) ballot.”

I-155 would increase the income ceiling for CHIP eligibility up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$53,000 for a family of four. The program covers about 16,000 children now, with an income ceiling at 175 percent of the poverty level.

Backers say Montana has 37,000 children without health insurance, and that the expansions in I-155 would end up covering about 30,000 of those children.